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opening extract from

Douglas Adams' Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy: Part Six of Three

And Another Thing...

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published by

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And Another Thing . . .
by
Eoin Colfer

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The storm had now definitely abated, and what thunder there was now grumbled over more distant hills, like a man saying 'And another thing . . .' twenty minutes after admitting he's lost the argument

– Douglas Adams

We have travelled through space and time, my friends, to rock this house again

– Tenacious D

Foreword

If you own a copy of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* then one of the last things you would be likely to type into its v-board would be the very same title of that particular Sub-Etha volume as, presumably, since you have a copy, then you already know all about the most remarkable book ever to come out of the great publishing corporations of Ursa Minor. However, *presumption* has been the runner-up in every major *Causes of Intergalactic Conflict* poll for the past few millennia, first place invariably going to *Land-Grabbing Bastards with Big Weapons* and third usually being a toss-up between *Coveting Another Sentient Being's Significant Other* and *Misinterpretation of Simple Hand Gestures.* One man's 'Wow! This pasta is fantastico!' is another's 'Your momma plays it fast and loose with sailors.'

Let us say, for example, that you are on an eight-hour layover in Port Brasta without enough credit for a Gargle Blaster on your implant, and if upon realizing that you know almost nothing about this supposedly wonderful book you hold in your hands, you decide out of sheer brain-fogging boredom to type the words 'the hitchhiker's guide to the galaxy' into the search bar on *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, what results will this flippant tappery yield?

Firstly, an animated icon appears in a flash of pixels and informs you that there are three results, which is confusing as there are obviously five listed below, numbered in the usual order.

Guide Note: That is if your understanding of the usual numerical order is from small to large and not from derivative to inspired, as with Folfangan Slugs who judge a number's worth based on the artistic integrity of its shape. Folfangan supermarket receipts are beauteous ribbons, but their economy collapses at least once a week.

Each of these five results is a lengthy article, accompanied by many hours of video and audio files and some dramatic reconstructions featuring quite well-known actors.

This is not the story of those articles.

But if you scroll down past article five, ignoring the offers to remortgage your kidneys and lengthen your pormwrangler, you will come to a line in tiny font that reads '*If you liked this, then you might also like to read . . .*' Have your icon rub itself along this link and you will be led to a *text only* appendix with absolutely no audio and not so much as a frame of video shot by a student director who made the whole thing in his bedroom and paid his drama soc. mates with sandwiches.

This is the story of that appendix.

Introduction

So far as we know . . . The Imperial Galactic Government decided, over a bucket of jewelled crabs one day, that a hyperspace expressway was needed in the unfashionable end of the Western Spiral Arm of the Galaxy. This decision was rushed through channels ostensibly to pre-empt traffic congestion in the distant future, but actually to provide employment for a few ministers' cousins who were forever mooching around Government Plaza. Unfortunately the Earth was in the path of this planned expressway, so the remorseless Vogons were dispatched in a constructor fleet to remove the offending planet with gentle use of thermonuclear weapons.

Two survivors managed to hitch a ride on a Vogon ship: Arthur Dent, a young English employee of a regional radio station whose plans for the morning did not include having his home planet blasted to dust beneath his slippers. Had the human race held a referendum, it would have been quite likely that Arthur Dent would have been voted *least suitable to carry the hopes of humankind into space*. Arthur's university yearbook actually referred to him as 'most likely to end up living in a hole in the Scottish highlands with only the chip on his shoulder for company'. Luckily Arthur's Betelgeusean friend, Ford Prefect, a roving researcher for that illustrious interstellar travel almanac *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, was more of an optimist. Ford saw silver linings where Arthur saw only clouds and so between them they made one prudent space traveller, unless their travels led them to the planet Junipella

where the clouds actually did have silver linings. Arthur would have doubtless steered the ship straight into the nearest cloud of gloom and Ford would have almost certainly attempted to steal the silver, which would have resulted in the catastrophic combustion of the natural gas inside the lining. The explosion would have been pretty, but as a heroic ending it would lack a certain something, i.e. a hero in one piece.

The only other Earthling left alive was Tricia McMillan, or Trillian to use her cool, spacey name, a fiercely ambitious astrophysicist cum fledgling reporter who had always believed that there was more to life than life on Earth. In spite of this conviction, Trillian had nevertheless been amazed when she was whisked off to the stars by Zaphod Beeblebrox, the maverick two-headed Galactic President.

What can one say of President Beeblebrox that he has not already had printed on T-shirts and circulated throughout the Galaxy free with every uBid purchase? ZAPHOD SAYS YES TO ZAPHOD was probably the most famous T-shirt slogan, though not even his team of psychiatrists understood what it actually meant. Second favourite was probably: BEEBLEBROX. JUST BE GLAD HE'S OUT THERE.

It is a universal maxim that if someone goes to the trouble of printing something on a T-shirt then it is almost definitely not a hundred per cent untrue, which is to say that it is more than likely fairly definitely not altogether false. Consequentially, when Zaphod Beeblebrox arrived on a planet, people invariably said 'yes' to whatever questions he asked and when he left they were glad he was out there.

These less than traditional heroes were improbably drawn to each other and embarked on a series of adventures, which mostly involved gadding around through space and time, sitting on quantum sofas, chatting with gaseous computers

and generally failing to find meaning or fulfilment in any corner of the Universe.

Arthur Dent eventually returned to the hole in space where the Earth used to be and discovered that the hole had been filled by an Earth-sized planet that looked and behaved remarkably like Earth. In fact this planet was an Earth, just not Arthur's. Not *this* Arthur's, at any rate. Because his home planet was at the centre of a Plural zone, the Arthur we are concerned with had found himself shuffled along the dimensional axis to an Earth that had never been destroyed by Vogons. This rather made *our* Arthur's day, and his usually pessimistic mood was further improved when he encountered Fenchurch, his soulmate. Luckily this idyllic period was not cut short by bumping into any *alternate Universe* Arthurs who may have been wandering around, possibly in Los Angeles working for the BBC.

Arthur and his true love travelled the stars together until Fenchurch vanished in mid-conversation during a hyperspace jump. Arthur searched the Universe for her, paying his way by exchanging bodily fluids for first-class tickets. Eventually he was stranded on the planet Lamuella and made a life for himself there as sandwich maker for a primitive tribe who believed that sandwiches were pretty hot stuff.

His tranquillity was disturbed by the arrival of a couriered box from Ford Prefect, which contained *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* Mk II in the form of a smarmy pandimensional black bird. Trillian, who was now a successful newswoman, had a delivery of her own for Arthur in the shape of Random Dent, the daughter conceived with the donated price of seat 2D on the Alpha Centauri red-eye.

Arthur reluctantly took on the role of parent, but was completely out of his depth with the truculent teenager.

Random stole the *Guide* Mk II and set a course for Earth, where she believed she could finally feel at home. Arthur and Ford followed, to find Trillian already on the planet.

Only then is the Mk II's objective revealed. The Vogons, irritated by the Earth's refusal to stay *ka-boomed*, had engineered the bird to lure the escapees back to the planet before they destroy it in every dimension, thus fulfilling their original order.

Arthur and Ford rushed at semi-breakneck speed to London's Club Beta, pausing only to purchase foie gras and blue suede shoes. Thanks to the old dimensional axis/Plural zone thing, they found Trillian *and* Tricia McMillan co-existing in the same space-time, both being screamed at by an emotional Random.

Confused? Arthur was, but not for long. Once he noticed the green death rays pulsating through the lower atmosphere, all of the day's other niggling problems seemed to lose their nigglyness – after all, confusion was not likely to slice him into a million seared pieces.

The Vogon Prostetnic had done his job well. Not only had he lured Arthur, Ford and Trillian back to the planet Earth, but he'd also managed to trick a Grebulon captain into destroying the Earth for him, thus saving the crew several hundred Vog hours' paperwork with the munitions office.

Arthur and his friends sit powerless in London's Club Beta and can only watch as the ultimate war on Earth is waged, unable to participate, unless involuntary spasming and liquefaction of bone matter counts as participation. On this occasion the weapons of destruction are death rays rather than Vogon torpedoes, but then, one planet-killing device is pretty much the same as another when you're on the receiving end . . .

I

According to a janitor's assistant at the Maximegalon University, who often loiters outside lecture halls, the Universe is sixteen billion years old. This supposed truth is scoffed at by a clutch of Betelgeusean beat poets who claim to have moleskin pads older than that (rat-a-tat-tat). Seventeen billion, they say, at the very least, according to their copy of the Wham Bam Big Bang scrolls. A human teenage prodigy once called it at fourteen billion based on a complicated computation involving the density of moon rock and the distance between two pubescent females on an event horizon. One of the minor Asgardian gods did mumble that he'd read something somewhere about some sort of a major-ish cosmic event eighteen billion years ago, but no one pays much attention to pronouncements from on high any more, not since the *birth of the gods* debacle, or Thorgate as it has come to be known.

However many billions it actually is, it *is* billions and the old man on the beach looked as though he'd counted off at least one of those million millions on his fingers. His skin was ivory parchment and, viewed in profile, he closely resembled a quavering uppercase S.

The man remembered having a cat once, if memories could be trusted as anything more than neuron configurations across trillions of synapses. Memories could not be touched with one's fingers, could not be felt like the surf flowing over his gnarled toes could be felt. But then what

were physical feelings if not more electrical messages from the brain? Why believe in them either? Was there anything trustworthy in the Universe that one could hug and hold on to in the midst of a butterfly storm, other than a Hawaliusian wind staunch?

Bloody butterflies, thought the man. *Once they'd figured out the wing fluttering a continent away thing, millions of mischievous Lepidoptera had banded together and turned malicious.*

Surely that could not be real, he thought. *Butterfly storms?*

But then more neurons poured across even more synapses and whispered of improbability theories. If a thing was bound never to happen, then that thing would resolutely refuse not to happen as soon as possible.

Butterfly storms. It was only a matter of time.

The old man wrenched his focus from this phenomenon before some other catastrophe occurred to him and began its rough slouch to be born.

Was there anything to trust? Anything to take comfort from?

The setting suns lit crescents on the wavelets, burnished the clouds, striped the palm leaves silver and set the china teapot on his veranda table twinkling.

Ah, yes, thought the old man. *Tea. At the centre of an uncertain and possibly illusory Universe there would always be tea.*

The old man traced two natural numbers in the sand with a walking stick fashioned from a discarded robot leg and watched as the waves washed them away.

One moment there was forty-two and the next there wasn't. Maybe the numbers were never there and perhaps they didn't even matter.

For some reason this made the old man cackle as he leaned into the incline and plodded to his veranda. He settled with

much creaking of bone and wood into a wicker chair that was totally sympathetic to the surroundings, calling to his android to bring some biscuits.

The android brought Rich Tea.

Good choice.

Seconds later the sudden appearance of a hovering metal bird caused a momentary lapse in dunking concentration and the old man lost a large crescent of his biscuit to the tea.

'Oh, for heaven's sake,' grumbled the man. 'Do you know how long I have been working on that technique? Dunking and sandwiches. What else are left to a person?'

The bird was unperturbed.

'An unperturbed bird,' said the old man softly, enjoying the sound of it. He closed the bad eye that hadn't worked properly since he'd fallen out of a tree as a giddy boy, and examined the creature.

The bird hovered, its metallic feathers shimmering crimson in the sun's rays, its wings beating up tiny maelstroms.

'Battery,' it said in a voice that reminded the old man of an actor he had once seen playing Othello at London's Globe Theatre. Amazing what you can get from a single word.

'You did say "battery"?' asked the man, just to confirm. It could possibly have been 'flattery', or even 'hattery'. His hearing was not what it used to be, especially on initial consonants.

'Battery,' said the bird again and suddenly reality cracked and fell to pieces like a shattered mirror. The beach disappeared, the waves froze, crackled and evaporated. The last thing to go was the Rich Tea.

'Bugger,' muttered the old man as the final crumbs dissipated on his fingertips, then he sat back on a cushion in the

room of sky that suddenly surrounded him. Someone would be coming soon, he was sure of it. From the dim caverns of his old memories, the names Ford and Prefect emerged like grey bats to associate themselves with the impending disaster.

Whenever the Universe fell apart, Ford Prefect was never far behind. Him and that accursed book of his. What was it called? Oh, yes. *The Pitchforker's Pride is a Fallacy*.

That, or something very close to it.

The old man knew exactly what Ford Prefect would say.

Look on the bright side, old mate. At least you're not lying down in front of a bulldozer, eh? At least we're not being flushed out of a Vogon airlock. A room of sky is not too shabby, as it happens. It could be worse, a lot worse.

'It will be a lot worse,' said the old man with gloomy certainty. In his experience, things generally got worse, and on the rare occasion when things actually seemed to get better, it was only as a dramatic prelude to a cataclysmic worsening.

Oh, this room of sky *seemed* harmless enough, but what terrors lurked beyond its rippling walls? None that were not terrible, of that the old man was sure.

He poked a finger into one of the wall's yielding surfaces and was reminded of tapioca pudding, which almost made the old man smile until he remembered that he had hated tapioca ever since a bullying head boy had filled his slippers with the stuff back in Eaton House Prep.

'Blisters Smyth, you sneaky shit,' he whispered.

His fingertip left a momentary hole in the clouds and through it the old man caught a glimpse of a double-height sash window beyond and, outside the window, could that be a death ray?

The old man rather feared that it was.

All this time, he thought. *All this time and nothing has happened.*

Ford Prefect was living the dream, providing *the dream* included residence in one of Han Wavel's ultra-luxury, five-supergiant-rated, naturally eroded hedonistic resorts, filling one's waking hours with *permanent damage* amounts of exotic cocktails and liaisons with exotic females of various species.

And the best bit: the expense of this whole self-indulgent and possibly life-shortening package would be taken care of by his Dine-O-Charge card, which had no credit limit thanks to a little creative computer tinkering on his last visit to *The Hitchhiker's Guide* offices.

If a younger Ford Prefect had been handed a blank page and asked, in his own time, to write a short paragraph detailing his dearest wishes for his own future, the only word he might have amended in the above was the adverb 'possibly'. *Probably*.

The resorts of Han Wavel were so obscenely luxurious that it was said a Brequindan male would sell his mother for a night in the Sandcastle Hotel's infamous vibro-suite. This is not as shocking as it sounds, as parents are accepted currency on Brequinda and a nicely moisturized septuagenarian with a good set of teeth can be traded for a mid-range family moto-carriage.

Ford would perhaps not have sold either parent to finance his sojourn at the Sandcastle, but there was a bi-cranial cousin who was often more trouble than he was worth.

Every night, Ford rode the fleshevator to his penthouse, croaked at the door to grant himself entry, then made time to

look himself in the bloodshot eyes before passing out face down in the basin.

This is the last night, he swore nightly. *Surely my body will revolt and collapse in on itself?*

What would his obituary say in *The Hitchhiker's Guide*? Ford wondered. It would be brief, that was for sure. A couple of words. Perhaps the same two words he had used to describe Earth all those years ago.

Mostly harmless.

Earth. Hadn't something rather sad happened on Earth that he should be thinking about? Why were there some things he could remember, and others that were about as clear as a hazy morning on the permanently fogbound Misty Plains of Nephologia?

It was generally at about this maudlin stage that the third Gargle Blaster squeezed the last drop of consciousness from Ford's over-juiced brain and he would giggle twice, squawk like a rodeo chicken and execute a near perfect forward tumble into the nearest bathroom receptacle.

And yet, every morning when he lifted his head from the en suite basin (if he was lucky), Ford found himself miraculously revitalized. No hangover, no dragon breath, not even a burst blood vessel in either sclera to bear witness to the previous night's excesses.

'You are a froody dude, Ford Prefect,' he invariably told himself. 'Yes, you are.'

There is something fishy going on here, his rarely heard from subconscious insisted.

Fishy?

So long and thanks for all the . . .

Wasn't there something about dolphins? Not fish, true, but they inhabited the same . . . habitat.

Think, you idiot! Think! You should be dead a hundred times over. You have consumed enough cocktails to pickle not only yourself but several alternate versions of yourself. How are you still alive?

'Alive and froody,' Ford would say, often winking at himself in the mirror, marvelling at how lustrous his red hair had become, how pronounced his cheekbones. And he seemed to be growing a chin. An actual chiselled chin.

'This place is doing me good,' he told his reflection. 'All the photo-leech wraps and the irradiated colono-lemming treatments are really boosting my system. I think I owe it to Ford Prefect to stay another while.'

And so he did.

On the last day, Ford charged an underwater massage to his credit card. The masseur was a Damogranian Pom Pom Squid with eleven tentacles and a thousand suckers which pummelled Ford's back and cleaned out his pores with a series of whiplash tapotement moves. Pom Pom Squids were generally hugely overqualified for their work in the spa industry, but were tempted away from their umpteenth doctorates by the lure of high salaries, plankton-rich pools and the chance of massaging a talent scout for the music industry and maybe getting themselves a record deal.

'Have you done any talent-scouting, friend?' asked the squid, though he didn't sound hopeful.

'Nope,' replied Ford, bubbles streaming from his plexiglass helmet, face shining orange in the pleasant glow of rock phosphorescence. 'Though I once owned a pair of blue suede shoes, which should count for something. I still own one – the other is closer to mauve, due to it being a copy.'

The squid nipped at passing plankton as he spoke, which made conversation a little disjointed.

'I don't know if . . .'

'If what?'

'I hadn't finished.'

'It's just that you stopped speaking.'

'There was a glint. I thought it was lunch.'

'You eat glints?'

'No. Not actual glints.'

'Good, because glints are baby gloonts, and they're poisonous.'

'I know. I was merely saying that . . .'

'More glints?'

'Precisely. You're sure you're not a talent scout then, or an agent?'

'Nope.'

'Oh, for zark's sake,' swore the squid, a little unprofessionally. 'Two years I've worked here. Talent scouts and agents coming out of your suckers, they promised. Not one. Not bloody one. I was studying advanced kazoo, you know.'

Ford couldn't resist a lead-in like that. 'Advanced kazoo? How advanced can kazoo studies be?'

The squid was wounded. 'Pretty advanced when you can play a thousand of them at the same time. I was in a quartet. Can you imagine?'

Ford gave it a go. He closed his eyes, enjoyed the *whup-pop* of the suckers on his back and imagined four thousand kazoos playing in perfect sub-aquatic harmony.

Some time later the squid enveloped Ford in half a dozen tentacles and gently flipped him over. Ford opened one eye to read the squid's badge.

I am Barzoo, read the tag. *Use me as you will.*

And underneath in smaller print:

I am allergic to rubber.

'So, Barzoo. What kind of stuff did you play?'

The masseur got his tentacles a-pumping before he answered, whipping up a flurry of currents.

'Old songs mostly. Covers. You ever hear of Hotblack Desiato?'

I have *heard that name*, Ford realized, but he couldn't quite pin the memory down. Every day things got a little fuzzier.

'Hotblack Desiato. Wasn't he dead for a while?'

Barzoo cocked his head, thinking about this. The squid's beak hung open, ignoring the tiny streaks of plankton flashing by.

'Hey, if you can't remember, don't worry about it. I'm having a few memory problems myself in this place. Little things like how long I've been here, what my purpose in life is, which feet to put my shoes on. Stuff like that.'

The squid did not respond and its tentacles rested heavily on Ford's torso like old rope.

Ford hoped that Barzoo had not suddenly died, and if the squid *had* passed on to the energy stage would the suckers lose their suck, or go into some kind of death-suck mode? Ford had no desire to spend the rest of his holiday having tentacles surgically removed from his torso.

Then Barzoo blinked.

'Hey, buddy,' sighed Ford, bubbles spiralling from his helmet. 'Welcome back. For a second there, I thought . . .'

'Battery,' said the squid, beak clicking on the Ts. 'Battery.'

I never noticed before, thought Ford, *but that squid looks a lot like a bird.*

Then the underwater massage cave dissolved and Ford Prefect found himself deposited in a room composed of blue sky.

A familiar figure sat in the opposite corner.

'Ah,' said Ford, remembering.

Guide Note: Remembering is generally a two-stage process involving dialogue between the conscious and subconscious parts of the brain. The subconscious opens proceedings by throwing up the relevant memory, an act which releases a spurt of self-congratulatory endorphins.

'Well done, matey,' says the consciousness. 'That memory is really useful right now, and I couldn't remember where I'd put it.'

'You and me, pal,' says the subconscious, delighted to have its contribution acknowledged for once. 'We're in this together.'

Then the conscious reviews the memory in its in-tray and sends a message down to the sphincter telling it to prepare for the worst.

'Why did you remind me of this?' it rails against the subconscious. 'This is awful. Terrible. I didn't want to remember this. Why the zark do you think I shoved it to the back of my brain?'

'That's the last time I help you out,' mutters the subconscious and retreats to the darker sections of itself where nasty thoughts are housed. 'I don't need you,' it tells itself. 'I can make myself another personality out of these things you've discarded.' And so the seeds of schizophrenia are sown with kernels of childhood bullying, neglect, low self-esteem and prejudice.

Luckily, Betelgeuseans don't have much of a subconscious, so that's all right then.

'Ah,' said Ford again, followed quickly by, 'Crap.'

He stepped gingerly across the floor of sky, noticing with a jolt of surprise that one of his legs flickered slightly for a moment.

I'm not real, he realized, which was enough to stick a pin in his permanently buoyant mood, but he recovered quickly, something which the room's other occupant didn't seem to have managed just yet.

'Look on the bright side, old mate,' he called to the

Earthman. 'At least you're not lying down in front of a bulldozer, eh? At least we're not being flushed out of a Vogon airlock, remember that? A room of sky is not too shabby, as it happens. It could be worse, a lot worse.'

And it shortly will be if I'm right about what's going on here, thought Ford, but he didn't voice this opinion. Arthur looked as though he'd had quite enough bad news for one day.

Inter-planetary news reporter Trillian Astra spent a few anxious moments in the press bathroom before heading into the auditorium for possibly the biggest interview of her life. In the course of a celebrated career, Trillian had spent a year undercover in prosthetics working as a Vogon clerk in the Megabrantis Cluster. She had lost her left foot to frostbite when mine raiders on Orion Beta had ram-raided a madranite shaft, and more recently she had been attacked by a holistic orthodontist when she had the temerity to question the effectiveness of tooth-straightening chants.

The Galaxy knew Trillian's name. At the height of her career she was feared by shady politicians, movie moguls and pregnant single celebrities from Alpha Centauri to Viltvodle VI, but on this day she felt the spectre of fear at her own shoulder.

Galactic President Random Dent. Her daughter. Simulcast from the University of Maximegalon live to an audience of five hundred billion.

She was nervous. No, more than that. She was terrified. Trillian had not seen her daughter since . . .

My God, she realized. *I cannot remember precisely the last time I saw Random.*

Trillian tried to calm herself with ritual.

'You're looking good for an old bird,' she said to the mirror.

'Do you really tink this, dahling?' said the mirror, obviously highly offended by what paraded before its sensors. 'If this is good, then you are having the low standards.'

Trillian bristled. 'How dare you? If you had seen what I have seen, if you had been through what I've been through, then I think you might agree that I look pretty damn good.'

The mirror's sighs rippled the eight gel speakers mounted in its frame.

'Enough with the history lesson, dahling. I don't factor in the past, I just comment on the present. And right now, let me tell you, you look like Eccentrica Gallumbits in her third cycle. And believe me, honey, by that old whore's third cycle things were mostly liquid and gas. If I were you, I'd buy myself a good towel and a bathrobe and just . . .'

Trillian reached across and pounded her fist against the mirror's mute button.

When did they start to give mirrors character traits? She could remember when only top-end androids and the occasional very special door had the Sirius Cybernetics Corporation's Genuine People Personality feature.

Maybe Trillian didn't want to hear what the mirror had to say, but she could admit to herself that it was right.

She did look old. Ancient, in fact.

That's because I am *zarking ancient. A hundred and five earth years old. What's left of me.*

Over the years Tricia McMillan had been chipped away by her job as Sub-Etha reporter and soon only Trillian would remain. This was not simply a metaphorical statement:

Trillian Astra had always been prepared to sacrifice everything for the network – her friends, family, various body parts.

She lost the foot on Orion Beta during the mining hostilities. Seventy per cent of her epidermis was seared off by a plasma splash on the front line at the Carfrax Gamma Caves. Left hand and forearm were mangled by a desert crawler tread during the Dordellis Wars and her right eye poked out by a flag on a little pointy stick during a Wango-Pango teeniebop ice-capade on Gagrakacka.

So, what was left of Tricia McMillan was an original brain (with added nu-fluid), one rebuffed eye, a couple of cheeks (one buttock, one facial), an assortment of minor bones and two and a half litres of human blood. The other three litres were not technically blood at all but tears harvested from a hive of Silver-Tongued Devils, small mammals indigenous to the Hastromil system. They are relentlessly exploited because of the usefulness of absolutely every part of their beings, from their hinged silver tongues to their very thought waves, which can be harnessed to an aerial and used to boost video signal reception if you live down a hole. The same philosophers who cite the Babel fish as proof that God doesn't exist also cite the unfortunately initialled STD as proof that Satan does, an argument which even a potato with a charge running through it could see undermines their initial point. But what do they care? Head doctors love controversy.

Ironically, Trillian was in Hastromil to cover a rally to protect the STD when she was run over by a Silver Tongue float, constructed even more ironically from Silver Tongue hides, which irony she then trumped by receiving a Silver Tongue transfusion while wearing a 'Protect the Silver Tongue' T-shirt.

It was later reported, by Trillian herself, that all this localized irony overload had caused the death of eleven empaths attending the rally. Twelve, if the empath known to be already depressed was added to the statistic.

Trillian smooshed the plaskin on her cheek. It was smooth, but a little over-stretched. The guy at the checkout had promised that her face would loosen out with wear. But it never had. On bad days, Trillian thought her face looked like a skull pushed into a balloon.

A network executive had once described her as: a slim, darkish humanoid, with long waves of black hair, an odd little knob of a nose and ridiculously brown eyes.

Not any more.

Today was one of those bad days.

Random. After all these years.

Every time she looked into her daughter's eyes, it was like staring into pools of her own guilt.

Trillian slapped her palm against the mirror.

'Ow! Hey!' said the mirror, overriding the mute.

Trillian ignored it.

She needed to pull herself together. She had at one time been the Galaxy's most respected reporter and that was an achievement. She would force her regret into its box down in the pit of her stomach and go do her job.

Trillian plucked at a strand in her helmet of coiffed simhair, squared her shoulders and walked into the auditorium to interview the daughter that had been conceived in a lo-grav fertility satellite clinic near Barnard's Star.

Trillian shuddered. As if morning sickness had not been bad enough without lo-grav thrown into the mix.

Random had every right to feel displaced: her father was a test tube, her home planet, insofar as she had one,

had been destroyed in several dimensions and her mother had taken one look at her and decided to vigorously pursue a career that would take her far from home for long periods.

No wonder Random was a little frosty.

President Random Dent sat cross-legged in a hovering egg chair onstage, chanting quietly.

'Bicuspid lie behind canine behind lateral incisor behind central incisor. T-o-o-o-o-o-th, find your place.'

The curtain had not yet been drawn, but she could hear the hubbub of the crowd through the heavy material. The curtain was velvet, not holographic, an expense grudgingly borne by the university at Random's insistence. While in no way anti-progress, the President believed that there was still room for tradition in the Galaxy.

She smiled softly as her mother was led on to the platform. From a distance a person could be forgiven for thinking that their roles were reversed and that Trillian was the President's daughter, but up close the truth was plain. Surgery shine was written all over Trillian's face.

The reporter's step faltered as she caught sight of her daughter, but she recovered herself quickly.

'You look well, Madam President,' she said in that typical reporter's accent, which was somewhere between Sector ZZ9 and Asgard.

'As do you, Mother,' responded Random.

Trillian settled into a second egg chair and consulted her notes.

'President Random Frequent Flyer Dent. Still using too many names?'

Random smiled in the calm manner of one who has been

tantrum-free for decades. 'And you, Trillian Astra. Still using the wrong one?'

Trillian smiled tightly. This was not going to be an easy interview.

'Why now, Random? We haven't seen each other more than a dozen times in the past twenty years. Why now, when my career is on the wane? I go from beauty pageants on New Betel to the biggest interview of my life.'

Random smiled again, a gentle creasing of her outdoorsy face. Her grey-streaked hair was stiff with sunshine and salt water.

'I know it's been a while, Mother. Too long.' She stroked a small ball of fur around her neck and it mewled softly. Trillian saw tiny teeth and a tail and her heart sank.

'I've heard about that thing. Your constant companion. It's some kind of little gerbil, isn't it? Cute.'

'More than a cute gerbil, Mother. Fertle is my companion. A flaybooz. Fully grown. A font of knowledge, all transmitted telepathically.' And then she dropped the bomb. The career killer. 'We were married yesterday.'

Trillian's skin felt tighter than it had a minute ago. 'You were married?'

'It's a mental bond, obviously. Though Fertle does like me to tickle his tummy.'

Keep it together, Trillian told herself. *You are a professional.*

'Let me get this straight. You communicate *telepathically* with . . . Fertle?'

'Of course. Communication is what keeps families together. Haven't you heard?'

At this point, Trillian stopped being a reporter and started being a mother.

'Less of the pay-back jibes, young lady. This is your life

we're talking about. You are Random Dent, the President of the Galaxy. You united the tribes of Earth. You oversaw the official first contact ceremony.' Trillian was on her feet now. 'You spearheaded the economic drive into space. You negotiated for equal rights for aliens.'

'And now I want something for myself.'

Trillian strangled an imaginary Fertle, six inches in front of the real one. 'Not a gerbil, though. Not a zarking gerbil. How is a gerbil going to give me grandchildren?'

'We don't want kids,' said Random blithely. 'We want to travel.'

'What are you talking about? It's a rodent.'

'He,' said Random pointedly, 'is a flaybooz, as you well know. And I thought you, of all people, would understand our relationship. The formidable Trillian Astra. Champion of all people, except her daughter.'

Trillian thought she detected a chink of light in the gloom. 'Wait. What? This is about me? You are going to destroy your life to get back at me? That's one hell of a twisted revenge cocktail, Random.'

Random tickled her husband till he snickered. 'Don't be ridiculous, Mother. I wanted you here to introduce your son-in-law to the Galaxy. It will be your crowning moment as a journalist, and it will bring us together as a family.'

Trillian saw it all then, the genius of Random's *coup de grâce*. If she announced this union in full 3-D Spectro-Vision, then she would be a laughing stock. If she did not, then her daughter was lost to her for ever and would probably milk the situation for enough sympathy to win another term in office. At the very least, the flaybooz would vote for her, and there were zillions of those.

Trillian's frame jerked spasmodically. *Married!*

'Forget it, Random, you're not using me to put a spin on your relationship. As soon as I get out of here, I'm going to track down your father and he can deal with you.'

Random shook with laughter, frightening her husband. 'Arthur! Do you have any idea how far he would go to avoid confrontation?' She paused, cocking her head to one side. 'Fertle says, and I agree, that *you* have to announce this, Mother. The Galaxy is expecting big news.'

'Absolutely not. I refuse to be manipulated.'

'You'd rather be controlled by the networks, like the robot you are. I can hear you buzzing from here. I can smell your circuits. Is there any part of you that's real? Can you put me in touch with my human mother? Or perhaps you know where her backbone is buried.'

Trillian was almost relieved that the façade of civility was scorched away.

'Screw you, Random.'

The President nodded. 'Yes, Fertle. This is how she is. Are you surprised now that I am difficult to read? At all the defences I have erected around my brain?'

Trillian was almost shrieking. 'You are talking to a bloody yo-yo!'

Fertle seemed to react to this.

Guide Note: Though flaybooz have no ears, they are extremely sensitive to vibration and can actually explode in extreme circumstances. Thor, the Asgardian and sometime rock god, held the record for spontaneous flaybooz detonation when he debuted his new tune 'Let's Get Hammered' from a chariot in orbit around Squornshellous Delta. The record had previously been held by intergalactic rock band Disaster Area, who dropped a speaker bomb into a volcano crater where the flaybooz were enjoying a static electricity festival.

Fertle's fur bristled and he opened a tiny mouth that now seemed to have a beak.

'Battery,' said Fertle in a voice of wire and claws.

'What?' said Trillian. 'Did I just hear a flaybooz speak? Now that would be news.'

'Battery,' said Fertle again, this time with some urgency.

The velvet curtain rose slowly, but there was no audience behind it, just an auditorium of sky and two humanoid figures.

Random and Trillian stood and gaped, family resemblance clear for once in spite of the various surgeries and implants.

'What's happening?' said the President, her voice higher suddenly. 'Mother? What's happening? Where are my journalists?'

'Don't panic,' said Trillian, trying to keep the quaver from her voice. 'Something is happening here.'

'Something is happening?' shrilled Random. 'That's it? All of your years in the field and all you can come up with is *something is happening*. This is a kidnap attempt, that's what it is. We've been transported somewhere.'

Trillian squinted at the humanoid figures who seemed to be growing increasingly familiar, as though scales of forgetfulness were falling from her eyes.

'Kidnapped. I don't think so. Not by these two. They're harmless . . . mostly.'

Random adopted her favourite presidential power position, feet planted, arms crossed.

'You two men. What have you done? I demand to know where we are.'

The shorter man noticed the new arrivals; it was pretty likely that he would as one of them was shouting at him.

'I think the question should be *when* we are, then possibly *who* put us here, followed by *is there a drinks trolley?*'

Random scowled. 'Is there a drinks trolley indeed. Be flippant all you like, young man. I know that underneath you're as scared as we are.'

The young man smiled. 'I'm Betelgeusean, Random. We don't do underneath.'

Random lost the urge to riposte when the sudden recognition of the second man hit her like a Surprise-O-Plasm pie in the face.

'Father? Daddy? Dad?'

'Pick one,' suggested the Betelgeusean. 'It will make conversations easier.'

Trillian took off across the room of sky, moving faster than she had in years.

'Now, let's see what your father has to say about this marriage.'

Random suddenly seemed a lot younger. 'Daddy!' she howled. 'Daddy! My stupid mother hates my husband.'

The father figure dropped his head and wished for tea.